The Concordia University Irvine (CUI) Board of Regents in March endorsed a university proposal that would prepare the private Lutheran university to become a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). HSI designation will allow CUI to compete for federal grants that serve low-income and first-generation Hispanic students. With nearly a quarter of its undergraduate student body identifying as Latino—23.5 percent in 2017-2018—Concordia Irvine expects to meet eligibility by the 2019-2020 academic year.

In addition to HSI designation, Concordia University Irvine expects to receive designation as a Minority-Serving Institution (MSI). The private university is nearing the 50 percent threshold of qualifying for this second designation which would also offer access to federal funds in order to serve minority students.

“Demographics in our region are shifting,” said Concordia Provost Peter Senkbeil. “As part of our commitment to serving our community, it makes sense to pursue HSI designation in order to better serve our growing Hispanic and minority student body, many of whom are first-generation students.” Senkbeil oversees the university’s HSI and MSI initiatives. The U.S. Labor Department estimates that by 2024, nearly 20 percent of the U.S. workforce will be Hispanic. “We need to prepare the future workforce of our country when they walk through our doors. These funds will assist us in strengthening our efforts.”

Concordia University Irvine began to lay the groundwork for HSI efforts in 2016 with its Latina Leadership Conference—a free half-day event designed for female junior and senior high school students and community college students and their parents. The inaugural keynote from the White House’s Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics helped set the tone for the conference’s theme, then and today—college is not a dream, it’s a plan.

“One in three students at Christian colleges and universities are first-generation—the first in their family to attend college,” said Senkbeil. “Our efforts to become a Hispanic and Minority-Serving Institution aligns well with our mission to serve a diverse student body.”

While Concordia Irvine currently offers student services such as academic tutoring, with HSI and MSI funding, University organizers aim to enhance and expand those and other services with the help of the new funds. Plans include developing a mentoring program made up of first-generation faculty and staff who know what it’s like to be the first in their families to attend college. In addition, the University is working with local nonprofit youth development organizations which offer college readiness programs to their primarily low-income Latino students.

Granted by the U.S. Department of Education to non-profit two-year and four-year colleges and universities—public or private—with a 25 percent or higher Hispanic student population and more than half receiving financial aid, HSI designation allows institutions to compete for federal grants that fund faculty professional development, curriculum development, and student services. According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are over 450 colleges and universities designated as HSIs in the United States and Puerto Rico. In California, nearly all Cal States and half of community colleges and half of University of California campuses have received HSI recognition. Concordia University Irvine would be the second faith-based HSI university in Orange County following Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, and the second HSI university in the Concordia University System (CUS) following Concordia Chicago which has a 30 percent Hispanic student population and is currently applying for HSI status. Nearby UC Irvine received HSI designation May 2017.

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